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OO RUEHCHI RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHML #1909/01 2530253
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 100253Z SEP 09
FM AMEMBASSY MANILA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5129
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS IMMEDIATE
RHHMUNA/USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
RHOVQHS/COMSEVENTHFLT IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUWDQAB/NTSB WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001909

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/EX AND EAP/MTS
STATE PASS USAID

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [EAID](#) [SOCI](#) [EAGR](#) [SENV](#) [PREL](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: RAPID U.S./PHILIPPINES RESPONSE TO FERRY SINKING SAVES
LIVES

REF: A) MANILA 1504 B) Manila 1521 C) Manila 1543 D) Manila 1560

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In yet another major maritime disaster, a large ferry carrying 968 manifested passengers and crew sank September 6 off the southwest coast of Mindanao island. As of early afternoon September 9, the Philippines National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC) reported nine confirmed fatalities, and 959 rescued passengers from Superferry 9. All the dead are identified and none are American citizens. At the request of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force - Philippines (JSOTF-P) maritime and air assets assisted Philippine military and civilian in rescue and recovery. The Philippine Government has confined to port other vessels of the ferry's parent company, suspended the crew and taken the ferry's captain into custody. The Philippine Coast Guard has scheduled an inquiry to begin September 10. Philippine and international media reports have recognized U.S. efforts and Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro personally thanked the Ambassador for the assistance provided. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) According to the Philippine National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC), the Philippine Coast Guard received a distress call at approximately 0330 hours on September 6 that MV Superferry 9 (SF9) of the Aboitz Transport System Corporation was listing heavily ten nautical miles west of Siocon city, Zamboanga del Norte. The vessel was carrying 968 manifested persons. After all passengers and crew abandoned ship, SF9 capsized and then submerged at 0910 hours. Although the September 9 edition of the Malaya newspaper reported the recovery of a tenth body, a NDCC spokesman told EconOff at 1400 hours on September 9 that until the tenth fatality was confirmed by the Coast Guard the NDCC would maintain its position that all manifested passengers and crew are accounted for, with nine confirmed fatalities and 959 rescued survivors. All the dead are identified and none are American citizens.

¶3. (SBU) Air and water craft from the Philippine Air Force, Navy, and Coast Guard, as well as civilian fishing and commercial vessels responded to the distress call. The U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force - Philippines (JSOTF-P) received a request for support from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and immediately dispatched maritime vessels with rescue swimmers, medical personnel and supplies. The JSOTF-P vessels searched a 25 square mile area for survivors, delivered water to a Philippine Navy vessel carrying survivors, and ferried one injured female to hospital in Zamboanga City. A JSOTF-P helicopter transported AFP leadership to the scene and then assisted the search for survivors.

¶4. (SBU) Passengers quoted in media reports attributed the sinking to various causes. Some described the ferry as already listing upon departure from General Santos city, while others noted that cargo

loudly shifted mid-voyage, after which the crew ordered passengers to the opposite side of the vessel to compensate for the ship's listing. Still other passengers said the ships' engines stopped working, and others blamed a crack in the hull for the sinking. Mr. Tino Sison, Deputy Chief for Operations for the NDCC told EconOff that the absence of a fire or explosion discounted terrorist involvement, and that an official explanation would have to wait for results of a government investigation.

15. (SBU) On September 7 the Philippine Department of Transportation's Maritime Industry Authority ordered the Aboitz Corporation to cease operating ten of its transport vessels and suspended the 112 crew members of SF9. The vessel's captain is in Coast Guard custody. Aboitz appealed the suspension the next day, asking that four vessels in its fleet be exempted because they had passed technical and safety inspections this year. That exemption was partially granted on September 9 with the suspension limited to the remaining four superferry vessels in the firm's fleet. The Philippine Coast Guard announced that it would lead a special board of marine inquiry September 10 to investigate the sinking.

Oil Spill to Follow?

16. (SBU) A four square mile oil slick has officials worried that the ferry's fuel as well as 250 tons of oil cargo carried by the vessel may be leaking. The Coast Guard has deployed a vessel equipped with spill booms to assess and monitor leakage from the sunken ferry. Similarly, the Aboitz Corporation has retained the service of a private oil response vessel, the Harbor Star.

A Deadly Tradition Continues

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17. (SBU) The sinking of SF9 is only the latest in a long series of maritime catastrophes. Three other vessels sank in Philippine waters with the loss of two lives in the days before and after the SF9 went down. In May, 12 lives were lost when the ferry MV Commander 6 sank south of Manila, while four 2008 ferry disasters claimed over 900 lives (Reftels). The Philippines' deadliest maritime disaster, the 1987 sinking of the ferry Dona Paz that cost over 4,000 lives, was the subject of an August 25 National Geographic channel documentary.

Budget Airlines and Government Subsidies Squeeze Private Ferries

18. (SBU) Founded by one of the country's leading families in 1907, and once a mainstay of inter-island travel, the Aboitz Transport System Corporation has seen increasing numbers of its customers switch to budget airlines and government subsidized-roll-on roll-off vessels ('ro-ros'). While a Manila to Cebu ferry trip is an all day affair, local budget airline Cebu Pacific makes the trip in just over an hour. The ro-ros, by making regular stops at smaller islands not served by the larger shipping companies, have seen passenger traffic increase from 130,000 to 700,000 passengers between 2003 and 2007, according to Henry Basilio, a transportation expert at the University of Asia and the Pacific. In response, shipping companies such as Aboitz have slashed ticket prices by 80 percent or more but have been forced to rely increasingly on cargo when the volume of passenger traffic did not rebound.

Comment:

19. (SBU) While extreme weather contributes to Philippines' unenviable reputation as the maritime disaster capital of the world, poor maintenance, overloading, and lax enforcement of safety regulations are also to blame. Whether squeezed profit margins led the Aboitz Corp. to cut safety corners or overload cargo in this case will likely be addressed during the upcoming Coast Guard investigation.

110. (SBU) On a positive note, the aberration in this case was the small number of casualties. The quick and effective response of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the Philippine Coast Guard, civilian mariners and JSOTF-P greatly minimized the loss of life. The significant contribution of U.S. forces demonstrated our strong

commitment and partnership with the Republic of the Philippines, which was noted both in Philippine and international news media reports and in the personal thanks expressed by Defense Secretary Teodoro to the Ambassador. JSOTF-P's good work on the ferry accident serves as the latest example of the important benefits that U.S. forces, operating under the Visiting Forces Agreement, provide to the Philippines. End comment.

KENNEY